

#### S4, 11. Nitu Bajekal: Finding Me in Menopause: why lifestyle matters

Joyce Harper (00:00.918)

It's a great pleasure this week to talk to Nitu Bajekal, a dear friend of mine who's also one of the wise women I've interviewed for my book, of course. And we are discussing Finding Me in Menopause, Why Lifestyle Matters. Now Nitu has 40 years experience in women's health as a gynaecologist and much, much more. She's written two books, Finding Me in Menopause and is co-author of Living PCOS Free. And she has a brilliant website and There is so much important discussion in this podcast, not just about menopause. So please listen in even if you are not interested in menopause, because we are talking about why lifestyle matters. And Nitu and I are in total agreement about this. And it's just so important. Her core message is clear. If you don't make time for wellness, you will have to make time for illness. Enjoy. Welcome, Nitu!

Nitu Bajekal (00:03.455)

Hello Joyce, thank you for inviting me. I'm so happy and excited.

Joyce Harper (00:08.814)

I really am. We always have fabulous, very motivating conversations and I'm sure we're going to today. So let's start. Can you tell us more about your career journey and what led you to become a doctor and one specifically specializing in women's health?

Nitu Bajekal (00:26.987)

It's actually not as exciting as one may think. I did not suddenly wake up when I was three or four and think I'm always going to be a doctor. No, I was born in India in Calcutta and I was the youngest of three children and my sister and brother had gone into medicine. And in India in those days, you know, I'm 64. If you were good in studies, you basically became a doctor, lawyer, engineer. And my sister and brother were doctors. And my father was very keen that I become a track and field athlete, but there was no scholarships because sports was my thing. But of course, it's not gonna earn you any money. So I went into medicine. And boy, am I happy that I chose medicine because it just happened to suit me so, so well.

The only caveat was my father, I was a little bit of a wild child and so my dad wanted me to go away from Calcutta where I was getting into trouble quite a lot and so I went to Pondicherry which is a little sleepy seaside town with one of the best medical schools in India and I had to learn some French and anyway I met Rajiv, my future husband there we were first year medical students

And so that was his only request that we went away, my brother and I as well, we went away out of Calcutta to study. So when I was doing medicine, I didn't really think about what I was going to do. I enjoyed all aspects of it. But I knew that surgery really excited me. And then when I did my general surgical stint, I realized that I had to do something with surgery. And then obs and gyne, I loved, but I didn't like the fact that it was very very much female driven, as in there were only women in Obsengaini. And I didn't want to do a specialty that I felt was just so gender biased. But then after I did all the rounds, I

realized as I was in my elective posting and things, I realized that there was no other specialty that actually had the psychology and philosophy that you had to use a lot.

Nitu Bajekal (02:48.027)

There was surgery, there was medicine, there was no other discipline that actually covered everything. And I was so excited as I did more of it that I realized the thrill of Labour Ward, the thrill of surgery, making women really, you know, being with them when we delivered their babies. And these were really complex cases because they'd come from villages and all kinds of places. So it was very clear. And then when I didn't get into the medical college in Delhi in all in the institute. Initially, I thought I got into general surgery and I didn't get into obs and gyne. And I realized no OBGYN was my calling. And so when my name then came up for the prestigious institute, I was over the moon. It was exactly what I wanted and it's never disappointed me. The only thing I realized over time was there was something missing from my toolbox and we'll come to later was lifestyle medicine. was looking after women after they had fallen ill, after the event had occurred, after they had developed pregnancy-induced high blood pressure or gestational diabetes or endometrial cancer. I was doing the hysterectomy, but not really telling them how to prevent recurrence or prevent the cancer in the first place.

And that's when I discovered lifestyle medicine. But all in all, it's been one of the most satisfying careers. Came over to the UK, really for four years we thought we'd just travel the world. Old famous last words, we ended up having two beautiful daughters, sitting a million exams. And then, you know, as life happens, instead of going back to our lovely jobs and research academic jobs, we stayed on in England and we are here still 34 years later.

Joyce Harper (04:40.226)

very glad you are because it's absolutely fabulous. And we are on this podcast going to talk a lot about lifestyle medicine and using that as preventative medicine. It's something you and I are very passionate about. But I just wanted to ask a few questions first. So you are one of the very wise women I interviewed for my book and it was such a privilege to interview you all. But one of the first questions I asked you was your view on aging.

And I wanted to share that now. Nitu, what do you think about ageing?

Nitu Bajekal (05:16.095)

I don't know what I've said before, but in my head, I think I'm very blessed. And anybody who does reach any age is very blessed to reach that age that they are. Because I've had friends I've lost in their 20s, in their 30s, in their 40s. So to be 64 and touch wood without any health issues, I just think...

I am so blessed to be aging, you know. So that's my attitude towards aging because if I'm not aging, I'm dead and I don't want to die. So, you know, that's how I think. I don't have a problem with people wanting to make themselves look younger. I am just naturally I have, you know.

being blessed with Asian skin and things, so I don't have to do anything. But I do understand a lot of my patients and my friends who feel they need to have facelifts or botox and things like that. And I don't have an issue with that. Would I do it? I wouldn't. I do like the idea of aging more gracefully. But you can be graceful any which way, and it's to each their own. And one of the things that medicine teaches you is to try and not be judgmental of oneself or of others. So I am slightly vain. suppose I do dye my hair every two or three months. I suppose that way if you look at physical aging. But in my head mentally, have to say, I know I've said this before at your book launch, I do feel like I'm about 25 and I don't know why don't think I'm any wiser than I was at 25. I think I'm just as happy. So that's the age that sits very nicely with me.

Joyce Harper (07:12.448)

I feel the same as you and I feel better now than I've ever felt. I don't, yeah, but I, yeah. And I feel more physically fit than I've ever felt before as well. I'm doing more exercise than I've ever done. But yeah, with your sporting background that you had as a young girl, and you still do, we are going to bring that up because I don't think it's a coincidence that we're full of energy because you and I, both women who have looked after ourselves. And I don't think it's a coincidence that we all, maybe, obviously we've got genetics as part of it, but the fact that we don't look so bad for our age. You know, I'm just a year younger than you and yeah.

Nitu Bajekal (08:19.818)

Yes. No. And I do think, I don't know who I heard recently, but I do believe this very strongly that if you really want to build a girl's confidence, anybody's confidence, but a girl's confidence, I do think that introducing them to sports early allows them to not focus on diet, not focus on body weight, not focus on what other people think of you because you are immersed in this trying to better yourself in whichever it might be, tennis or swimming or running. For me, I was a hundred meter sprinter and a 110 meter hurdler and a basketball player later. And for me...

You know, I think a lot of my inherent confidence came partly from my great parents, my father, especially was a very hands on dad because my mother had a very busy job. She was a teacher, a head teacher. But I do feel that.

Being sporty or being introduced to sports from the age of four or five really allowed me to develop that confidence that I never felt I was lesser than any man or anybody else. I just felt I was competing with myself. I didn't care what others were doing.

Joyce Harper (09:57.92)

I totally agree with you. And I've done sports since I've done, I started with dance when I was young and then volleyball and hockey and continued with exercise. And it's such a passion of mine that I feel so lucky that I think we're lucky discovering it young with our parents, our parents obviously helped us. Yeah.

Nitu Bajekal (10:04.363)

Yeah.

Nitu Bajekal (10:17.395)

Yes, absolutely. And that's why I think, you know, if anybody is listening, bringing sports into young people's lives really allows the shift away from social media and, you know, the Manosphere or Instagram and TikTok, which we all love, but are so addictive that when you're out there playing a sport, you really, really do forget that phone. And I think that's the message I think I would have for people if they are tuning in and I'm sure they are.

Joyce Harper (10:52.814)

Yeah, yeah. And you had two girls, but I had three boys. my kids, before they even got to school, so preschool, they were already doing football, they were doing trampoline, they were doing gymnastics, they did swimming, they could all swim, they could dive. I mean, was more things, poor kids, we never stayed in. But I do think, and they think as well, they've told me, they think...

Nitu Bajekal (10:57.877)

Yes.

Nitu Bajekal (11:16.864)

Yeah.

Joyce Harper (11:20.482)

That's really, really helped. And one of my sons is still an elite athlete. He's in the US studying on a scholarship. it's, as you say, it's win-win in so many ways, mentally as well as physically. It's just...

Nitu Bajekal (11:26.539)

from it. Totally. You know with the diet culture and things nowadays, young men and women are really subject to so much of body image issues and I do think that when you're sporty, you can't focus so much because you've got to be strong, know? Strength is more important than being skinny or a particular body shape.

Joyce Harper (11:59.054)

Yeah, yeah, for sure. Now we're to dive into that in a minute, but I just wanted to talk first. So you've written two books. Let's talk about, we always talk about menopause, but your book, I love the title, it's called Finding Me in Menopause. Very, very clever. So why did you write this?

Nitu Bajekal (12:19.623)

Okay, so when I... It's a book that I've always wanted to write and I know sounds again cliched that this was a book I needed, so I wrote it. When I spoke to my book club friends who many of them are similar age to me, they said, why is this a horrible title? What do mean finding me? We were never lost. We had no problems. I said, get lost. I was the one who was lost and it's my book and I'm going to say I found myself. And so...

that's the name I'm going to stick with whether you like it or not. Because I went around asking them, I'm very close to all of them and they said they were never lost. And I said, good luck to you because a lot of my patients are lost and I certainly was lost.

I became menopausal at 38 which is as you know the average age of menopause is 51, 45 to 55 is the range and so I had something called premature ovarian insufficiency or premature menopause or premature ovarian failure. My ovaries did not fail me they just decided to pack up and I was fortunate that I had my children before but if I had been in today's age I probably wouldn't have started on my fertility journey.

So it was quite a shock and I thought I was being bullied because I was and I was in the stress of finding a consultant job. I wasn't an OBGYN, but it still never occurred to me that I could be having POI because my mother was, you know became menopausal at 52, my sister who was nine years older than me was still having her periods. It didn't even cross my mind. And I was really having anxiety and depression and hot flashes and all the things textbook actually. And I went to my GP and said, I need hormone replacement therapy. And my GP said, I'm so sorry, I cannot prescribe this.

Nitu Bajekal (14:10.339)

HRT causes cancer and I said no it doesn't I'm a consultant I'm telling you you have to give it to people under 40 and she said no the latest study has just come out and that is not something that I'm prepared to give you and I should have gone to my male colleagues because I was one of four we had three male colleagues and in hindsight they would have been amazing and they would have given it to me but I was a keyhole surgeon, I was a lead of this and lead of that, an FGM and this, that and the other. I didn't want them to think that I needed a patch. And so, very wrongly, I decided to just cope then. And as a result, really struggled until my younger daughter who was nine came home and decided that she was going vegan. And I said, what? And she said, yes i'm actually going vegan i said you eat sausages for breakfast lunch and dinner so how are you going to do that so anyway being a good mom i started supporting her and i changed the way i ate i was a vegetarian but i was very dairy heavy and i changed you know because i was quite conscious that i needed both my girls to have the right nutrition because Rohini my older daughter also became went vegan in six months not my husband so I realized then I started feeling much better, but I didn't put two and two together. I didn't think it was, I just thought I'd grown out of it or something like that. So the book I wrote was because as I said, I felt something was missing from my toolbox. I was seeing women once their condition had already... occurred and I wanted to be preventative. And so that's when I started researching and realizing all this advice that I was giving. I hadn't invented it. My parents had already followed something like that. There were already disciplines all over the world that were actually doing this. There was nothing rocket science that I was doing. And so I started putting all those thoughts into what I had practiced for about 10, 15 years.

Nitu Bajekal (16:15.389)

into the book which I wrote after our second after my first book so this was our second book and you know it's it's been received very well I have to say and there's little for every there's something for everybody there's lots of misinformation that has been

debunked, lots of information about HRT, all the stuff about lifestyle medicine looking at sleep and stress management and diet and exercise and the use of alcohol or the misuse of alcohol and just social connection, just you and me talking to each other or giving ourselves a hug when we met at your book launch, that releases oxytocin and it's so important and we do not realize how loneliness can play a huge role. So yeah, that's why I wrote that book for little old 38 year old me as well as for anybody else who wants to read and understand that it's not one or the other you can do medical treatment alongside holistic treatment because often the message to women is that you are a bad person if you take contraceptives or if you take HRT or weak and doctors will tell you that actually, you know, sleep and stress and diet doesn't matter and it does, it matters hugely. So I'm hoping, my hope always has been to bring women in the center of care and for them to drive it.

Joyce Harper (17:43.022)

I, when I read your book, I, was, it was the first book that I read and I thought, wow, she's totally on my page with this whole lifestyle. But it was, you know, when you wrote this and when I started thinking about it as well, it was still, people were thinking that we were being a bit woo woo. And I mean, it doesn't make any, it doesn't make any sense to me because obviously looking after our pillars of our health.

Nitu Bajekal (18:01.547)

Correct.

Nitu Bajekal (18:06.154)

No.

Joyce Harper (18:10.582)

As you said, our nutrition, our exercise, our sleep, looking after our mental health, our friendships and community. We have so much evidence, clinical evidence to show that this, it's there, it's there. And it's very clear. It will reduce our risk of, I believe, all the chronic health conditions. But what I keep saying to everybody,

Nitu Bajekal (18:22.975)

The science is clear. The science is clear.

Nitu Bajekal (18:36.718)

All the chronic health.

Joyce Harper (18:38.666)

It makes you feel better right now. And you talked about phones and I think we are living in societies where every day, I'm sure you get this, every day women tell me, I've done a menopause talk this morning for our university, menopause in the workplace, and women were already saying, I don't have the time. This is what I get every day. I don't have the time. What do you mean? This makes no sense at all.

Nitu Bajekal (19:06.823)

No sense.

Joyce Harper (19:08.078)

You don't have the time because we should be looking after ourselves as our number one issue in our life. And it should start in schools. It should start in schools. We should get, need to get, like you said about the sports, the sports it needs to get, but you know, nutrition, eating, you know, ultra processed food, it's coming out now, but my goodness, it took its time. Only now people are saying,

Nitu Bajekal (19:18.805)

Go to the

Nitu Bajekal (19:23.081)

Absolutely. Yeah.

Nitu Bajekal (19:35.647)

So long, you know?

Joyce Harper (19:38.124)

Yeah.

Nitu Bajekal (19:38.636)

In COVID, actually COVID put a stop to, I did a few sessions during COVID and I want to really re-select it but basically for years, for about eight years, I ran a program called Women for Women's Health, which I don't necessarily agree with that name now, but we went into all the inner school, inner city schools in London where I would run a half a day program for not the,

Highest year, you know the year 10s and 11s, so the ones just before their exams and things. The 14, 15, 16 year olds. And we would do 20 minute sessions with 15, 20 children in each group and we would ask them to try a berry or a fruit or a nut or something that they had never done. A whole tray of all the possible breakfast foods that they could eat. And a little talk on nutrition.

20 minutes, then 20 minutes the next group would go and do some yoga for period pain. Then the next lot would have a 20 minute session where they could talk. We could talk about safer sex and contraceptives and bus summits. And then another 20 minutes where you do pilates for strength and then basically come together and do face yoga and laughter yoga. And, you know, we'd get little companies to give us some good

you know, like fruit and nut mixes and things like that, just to encourage them. And it was really doing so well and then COVID hit. And we did some online ones, but they never were the same. So I think that's important. And it's also important. I have a slide somewhere where I say that if you don't make time for wellness, you will have to make time for illness. And it's so important because

Otherwise you're going to find that you have to have those doctors appointments, you have to make time to take lots of medications, you have to, you know, maybe have

surgery or medications and treatment and chemotherapy. You know, you can't avoid all that, but you certainly can give it a really big helping hand by focusing a little bit on any of those pillars. You know, it doesn't have to be that you have to eat

Nitu Bajekal (21:53.44)

clean 100 % nobody can do that but what you can do at the end of the day is make little changes in the area so if you are sleeping you know after looking at your phone for a long time maybe putting the phone away or you know looking at morning light or going for a little walk or having your meal about at six o'clock instead of at nine o'clock

Little changes like that will make you then reach for that apple rather than that glass of wine and it'll help you reach for you know a little run in the morning with or a walk with a friend rather than actually having just a coffee with a friend. So these little things can actually make such a difference and I found that myself because my sleep I tell you Joyce has been always it's become so much better now but always suffered from early menopause plus being in obstetrics and being on call every third night and then every fourth or fifth night I was always sleep deprived but I have made so many changes because I know that that's the one last pillar that I was falling very very short on.

Joyce Harper (23:01.132)

Yeah, for me, my sleep is my superpower. So I don't do anything. Yeah, I am very, very lucky. I do not do anything now that's going to keep me up past 11 o'clock. But listen, the day I did my book launch that you kindly came to, I didn't get home till 1 a.m. A one-off. It's a one-off.

Nitu Bajekal (23:05.483)

That's so nothing, so good.

Nitu Bajekal (23:16.195)

yes. That's a one-off. Come on. Those are great things. Absolutely. You know, and I think one of the great things about aging has been, as I said, I don't feel that much different, but one of the great things is actually being able to say, no, I can now actually look at something and just say, no, not doing it. Not going there. I'm going up to bed or I'm sitting down with my book or

Joyce Harper (23:29.478)

It's a one-off. Yes.

Nitu Bajekal (23:53.372)

no I'm not going for that party I don't know anybody there not interested and I tell you that I think does come with age and you know because the confidence it takes time to build that confidence some people probably have it inherently I didn't I'm a I'm a people I used to be a

Joyce Harper (24:08.779)

Well, I know you like dancing and I've you before we started recording, I've just got back from a conference in Barcelona and they know I like dancing. So after one of the

dinners, they organized an after party. no, I to, I didn't go. I felt very bad. I felt really bad and I got nagged, but I didn't go because I just got back from the USA. was on, know, my sleep was...

Nitu Bajekal (24:37.339)  
was old. Yeah.

Joyce Harper (24:38.606)  
But my body, my sleep was okay, but my body was, but if I'd have stayed up and my talk was the next morning as well, but that doesn't stop me. What stopped me was I wouldn't have got to bed till 1 a.m. And with all the travel, we do learn. Wise women, we become wise women. So let's just dig into each of them a bit more. Let's talk about the nutrition one first, because I know, you said, being vegan is very important to you.

Nitu Bajekal (24:44.679)  
now now

Nitu Bajekal (24:50.155)  
Correct. Correct. Yes.

Joyce Harper (25:06.664)  
And all of these are in your book and they're all in my book as well. So yeah, we're so on the same page. the quote, I wanted to read out the quote, one of the many quotes of yours I wrote in my book. One of them was, being plant-based is not just good for our own health, it's good for the planet, it's good for the sentient beings that we share the world with and the health benefits are unquestioned. One word of wisdom about nutrition. What would you like to tell people that?

Nitu Bajekal (25:29.44)  
Yes. When you look down on your plate, I want you to see color. That's the only piece of advice I have. Because veganism is an ethical philosophy. I don't need people to be vegan. That's something I choose just like somebody might choose to be Christian or Hindu or Muslim or Jewish. No. I want people to understand that when you put plants on your plate,

Joyce Harper (25:36.718)  
What do you like to tell people?

Nitu Bajekal (26:05.169)  
you will enhance your health, your mental health, your physical health and at the same time you will do good to the environment and to the sentient beings that we share the world with. Why do I say that we should eat color to color? Because when you eat beige foods or foods that don't bring vibrancy and joy, both while we eat with our eyes,

They also have all the antioxidants and the nutrients. So I do want people to think, can I have fruits, vegetables, lentils, peas, soya? Can I have lots and lots of nuts and seeds and make water the drink of my choice? When you try and bring that without thinking, I

can't eat the pizza. I can't have, I... you know, I'm vegan, but I can eat vegan pizza and I love a vegan pizza and I love a vegan chocolate cake. That does not mean to say that that is going to bring me help if I ate that regularly. What I do want to eat is foods that are really going to nourish us from inside out and that is color. So when you eat like that, rather than thinking I have been a bad person, I ate that piece of cake or I ate the whole cake or I ate a whole pizza.

Don't think about the foods that you're cutting out. Think of the foods that you're bringing in. That is so important. Instead of saying, you know what, I really need to cut down and not have eight coffees in a day. Instead say, I need to have three glasses of water in a day. So when you're then doing that, or if you're going to have three glasses of wine and you say, I'm going to instead have a glass of sparkling water or non-alcoholic wine you are bringing that which means that you're slowly adding out that extra glass of wine or that extra coffee or whatever it might be. Crowding out is better than thinking, you know, all food is good or bad. It does not matter. You know, going on holiday, eating things, going, staying out till one o'clock at night, you know, on on a celebrity occasion, having a glass of champagne. Those things do not matter. It's not that's not the big picture. So nutrition look down on your plate do you see color can you try and bring in and also as you get older protein is really important and the misconception is that protein comes from animals no look at all the strongest animals in the world the elephant the rhino the hippo the giraffe what do they eat they eat plants and you'll say Neetu I don't want to be a hippo or an elephant well then look at the gazelle and the antelope and and the deer and the rabbit and they're all also plant-based so what you want to do is you do want to focus on protein and for somebody who's 100 % plant-based like me you have to focus a little bit more like somebody who is very like a gym bunny you know you need to know that you have to understand your protein. have to get it from sources, especially from soy based products. So tofu, tempeh, miso, edamame, soy milk, soy yogurt, lots of lentils, lots of things like porridge and flaxseed and linseeds and beans, all these things, but you do have to focus on it. Most foods contain some protein, but you have to aim for 1.6 grams of per kilogram for protein especially you are doing strength training which is so important. So not focusing on protein is a no no but that does not mean chicken breast and eggs. Yes you can eat those occasionally but remember tofu has more protein than eggs and more safe protein. actually lowers the risk of breast cancer, prostate cancer, gives you a slimmer waist, better for the heart, better for the liver, liver cancer, ovarian cancer.

You know, it's a magic bean in many ways. People are very scared of soy, even in the plant-based community. And I have so much information on my website and in the books. You know, I'm not paid by any soy industry, but I tell you, I eat about four portions a day. And it's what keeps me so strong, I think. And a portion is not big. A portion is just one handful. So a portion is an apple, a portion of...

Joyce Harper (30:26.36)

Brilliant, brilliant, right, let, yeah.

Nitu Bajekal (30:35.199)

tofu is like a little handful 80 grams but if you're a child a portion is not your handful a portion for a child is their their handful so it might be one or two slices of apple rather than a whole apple

Joyce Harper (30:48.248)

Yeah, yeah, perfect, perfect. Right, we're gonna go through each of them. So we've talked a bit about exercise already, and obviously we're both very, very passionate about that. And as you say, getting this into young people's routines and schedules, I think is a win-win-win. It really is a win-win-win. What would be your one piece of advice about exercise, especially for those women that say they don't have time?

Nitu Bajekal (31:07.071)

on this strength training. Do nothing else. If you do nothing else, do strength training. What does strength training mean? You can either use your own body weight or you can use weights. If you're going to use weights and you've never done them before, ask people to give you a little gift of maybe a good personal trainer for a few sessions, three or four sessions so you know how to do a proper deadlift and things like that. But lifting weights or doing pilates and things like that can really help. Swimming, yoga and all are great but they are swimming and cycling are not they don't really they're not bone strengthening things so you have to actually do that I'm not a great fan of running although I you know I've run half marathons and and lots of other but I feel there's a lot of inflammation and they're not great for your knees and things like that so I they don't necessarily increase your bone mass yes it can help a little bit with you know your legs but generally speaking, know, lifting weights and if you're very slight, so a lot of my patients tend to be quite slim and small built. So for them, I would definitely recommend wrist weights and ankle weights when you're walking around the house or going for a walk and also body rests, which are, you know, weighted so that they can actually increase that if walking their dog is a thing that they can do. So if you don't have time, find ways of actually doing some strength training. you know, lots and lots of YouTube videos where over 50s, for example, women will show you how to do strength training and you don't even have to pay any money to anybody to do that. And 10 minutes, come on, we can all find 10 minutes.

Joyce Harper (32:58.122)

Absolutely, we can all find timers. what are you, what exercise are you doing now? I know what you like, but you tell us.

Nitu Bajekal (33:04.171)

So I tend to do almost a two hour walk with my dogs every day and I tend to play golf probably three, four times a week. So most days I will average 25,000 steps. I also tend to do, I go to the local gym, which is actually.

It's the Council Run Gym which I've discovered about six months ago and I'm in love. So I do dancing, Pilates, yoga, strength training, you name it, everything. I love it because it's all with lots of other people. I do some HIIT classes but I've had a bad heel recently so I don't necessarily do that. But a lot of dancing and a lot of Pilates and strength. So I'm physically very active and I'm strong.

And so that's very good because it was always nice for my daughters who were nine and 12 to be the tallest in their class because, you know, being vegan came with a big label of being weak and not. And, you know, we know that the top elite athletes around the world, including people like Serena Williams and Djokovic and all, they're all vegans. And so we know that being plant-based has huge benefits for recovery and joint you know, health and muscle health and things like that. But you do have to focus a little bit more on it's not just like slapping a whole, you know, a chicken into the oven and eating it. You know, you do have to spend a little bit more time thinking and I do tend to take vegan protein supplements in my smoothie. So I tend to have pea, I tend to rotate it. So creatine always because there's good evidence and I've discussed that in the book for women, but also I take, I rotate it with pea protein, brown rice protein and soy protein. And so I tend to have one day I'll have this, one day I'll have that, one day I'll have that. And it just gives me, allows me to hit that 1.6 kilograms, grams per kilogram body weight.

Joyce Harper (35:12.046)

Brilliant. And let's go back to sleep. So you mentioned that you had problems. I think probably your shift work for Obz and Gyne, I mean, it's so detrimental. It's brutal. Yeah. But you've been working on it. So what advice would you give people? Lots of women tell us that they're, especially around the perimenopause, that they're really struggling with their sleep. What advice would you give them?

Nitu Bajekal (35:20.575)

Yes. It's... It's brutal. It's brutal.

Nitu Bajekal (35:35.754)

Yes. Yeah. Yeah. I would say sit down and actually document what is happening. Are you finding it hard to sleep? Are you waking up early? Are you worrying about things? So depending on what the problem is or is it just hot flashes and things like that. So I have lots of advice on my website and in the books. But what I tend to say is few things if it's hot flashes and night sweats then try to learn to layer and try to have separate duvets from your partner little things like that will allow you to keep the temperature down in the room those are little things but also getting morning light making sure that you don't have you know you're not watching your phone and screens you know a couple of hours before you can avoid that trying to eat early and eating a good carbohydrate protein rich not simple carbohydrates complex carbohydrates and protein rich meal at about 6.37 if it's possible even if you're at work try to eat before doing that allows you to have a couple of hours before you get into bed have a like a bedtime routine which allows me to then say okay you know what I'm going to read a few chapters or I'm going to listen to a podcast or do something that allows you to wind down have a nice shower because if you've been up and about all day you know you

it is nice to allow all that to wash away so that you can then be relaxed in your clean sheets. So these are little things and then you might need little help. Some, you know, like if I'm traveling, I need melatonin. Some people benefit from magnesium, bi-glycinate for sleep. You know, if you're

not sleeping because of pain, because of endometriosis pain or period pain or in perimenopause you can have adenomyosis and endometriosis related pain, arthritis then I would say seek help for those. You might need hormone replacement, you might need painkillers, you may need a sleeping tablet or you might need an anxiolytic. Those things are not to be completely poo pooed at all. But unless you know what the possible...

Nitu Bajekal (37:48.342)

causes and don't expect a doctor to find that out. You have to do that detective work yourself because they are not going to have the time to sit and ask you all those details. So you have to work out what's keeping me up because I'm a worrywart and I know that if I don't schedule time separately for worrying, I can spend the whole night. My friend lost her dog yesterday and I was like up all night checking my phone, you know, and she's in the US. I can't even help. So I, you know, Yeah, but then I give myself grace and I think, you know, it's okay to worry a little bit, it's fine. But worrying a lot can affect

Joyce Harper (38:24.298)

Let's take the worry. Yeah, let's take the worry thing. So the fourth pillar for me is our mental health. And as you talked about the phones and everything else in our lives and worry. And I think this absolutely has an effect on our sleep. People in what I'm seeing is they don't spend any time of their day calming down. And the brain has these different, you know, they have beta and gamma states, which is where we do all our work and we're buzzing, buzzing, buzzing.

Nitu Bajekal (38:32.095)

Yes.

Nitu Bajekal (38:48.096)

Connect.

Joyce Harper (38:53.816)

But we've got to come, we can't stay like that all day. It's so detrimental. So what's your advice about mental health?

Nitu Bajekal (38:57.225)

No, no.

Nitu Bajekal (39:02.631)

I think the key for me is when I look at my daughters or my husband or my best friends, I will never talk to them the way sometimes I would have spoken to myself. And I think the key from good mental health is to be kind and to give grace to yourself. Because if you would not say this to the person that you love the most,

Don't say it to yourself because the person who you should love most is really you. Nobody loves yourself or your body more than you and I've said that repeatedly in my

books because not your mother maybe for the first few years, not your father, not your partner but you should love yourself.

You may not like every bit of yourself. You may not like the way you react to certain things. I don't love my quick temper. I don't love the fact that I can be switched on all the time while my husband is like, ooh, he's always calm. And you know, that can be annoying because for both people, because he's always zen and I'm always like hyper. And, you know, but I may not like those bits and so I can try and change them, but I have to love myself.

Because I love my best friend or I love my daughter or I love my dogs. I don't question why they are. I might not like certain things that they might do to me or do to themselves, but I love them. And that's the message. If you want to have good mental health, boy, you have to love yourself. You have to think you're the bee's knees. Otherwise, nobody else is going to tell you that.

Joyce Harper (40:41.868)

Yeah, great advice. And the last pillar I want to talk about, which you've brilliantly segued into, is the friendships and community and how important they are in our life. And I know you've got a wonderful relationship with your husband. You told me in the book that you don't think anyone else would ever have put up with you.

Nitu Bajekal (41:02.087)

No, I would have been divorced longer though. I would have been divorced in my early 20s.

Joyce Harper (41:06.478)

That's...

Joyce Harper (41:09.868)

We love him, we love him, well done. But what's your advice about making sure, and you mentioned earlier about loneliness. Loneliness is a killer and as we age, it becomes more of an issue. So what's your advice about friendships and community?

Nitu Bajekal (41:12.97)

Yeah.

Nitu Bajekal (41:20.009)

Yeah. Yeah.

Nitu Bajekal (41:25.323)

I think you need to surround yourself with people from your tribe. You've got to have people that have similar values to you, people who get you, people who lift you up rather than pull you down. And I don't necessarily think that a partner is essential in that. I think as women, we are very strong. I love, as I said, I'm very fortunate, very blessed to have Rajiv in my life, but I do...

strongly believe that humans rely on others. If I went to Rajiv for everything, I think it would be a very boring life. You know, your partner is there for a certain thing and you can't expect them to provide you with everything. And you have to, that's why build your network, build the people around you, people who understand when you don't want to talk or you disappear for weeks and months on end or

You need to have built that initial foundation that you're going to be there if they need you and they're going to be there for you when you need them. And I think for me, that is really key because seeing how lonely people are breaks my heart. And this is not just in the UK or US, it's in India too. And so I do want to be that person who actually has other people in my life too, because

I feel there's a lot that I can learn from them and they can learn from me. I don't want to be on an island just with one person. No, thank you.

Joyce Harper (43:04.62)

Yeah, yeah, no, it's, it's so important. I say at this age, for all of those, I feel that it's quality, not quantity. We don't, you know, always if it's the sport or relaxing or your friendships, think about quality rather than the quantity. Now, before we move on, before we move on to your next book, there's a couple more questions I wanted to ask. So one is that I think nowadays everyone wants a quick fix.

Nitu Bajekal (43:13.085)

Always. You don't have to have.

Nitu Bajekal (43:22.315)

Thank

for two.

Joyce Harper (43:33.132)

Is there any quick fix to being healthy?

Nitu Bajekal (43:40.394)

I think believing in yourself, there's no quick fix, but you do have to believe in yourself. There's no quick fix like you can't just outrun a bad diet. You cannot.

Joyce Harper (43:43.597)

No.

Nitu Bajekal (43:53.64)

eat the perfect diet and expect that you'll have great mental health if you sit at home all day. You cannot just party with your friends and expect that you will not have any health issues if you are not looking at what you're eating and how you're interacting with others. So there is no quick fix. And sadly, as humans, we want a quick fix. You know, we want to hear good things about our bad habits. You know, I would love to hear that eating, you know,

vegan pizza every single day will be great for my health because that's one of my favorite foods. It ain't gonna happen. you know, no quick fix. But yeah, I do think that once you believe in yourself, that will allow you to quickly fix things in your life because you do then think you're worth it. You know, a lot of women don't have self-worth. They have been told repeatedly they're not important by society, by... parents, by partners, by... just generally that voice is always there in your head for a lot of women and so if you're lucky enough to have escaped that then or find a way to actually get that out of your head then you know people often think patriarchy is only through men, not and you know women propagated too so you know, don't let yourself feel threatened, you know, it's okay to occupy space, it's okay to sit with your legs wide open. I always do, I like to take a lot of space in a room because I don't think I'm anything less than any, I just don't, you know, I was brought up like that, my parents never made me feel any different from my sister or my brother and so I've always been able to stand up and I'm very grateful for that and I know a lot of women don't get that but

It's never too late. I don't think it's never too late to start.

Joyce Harper (45:48.268)

Yeah, perfect. Now, your other book's called Living PCOS Free. I'm going to dig into it in a minute, but I have done a podcast on PCOS before last year. Can you just remind us what PCOS is?

Nitu Bajekal (46:03.477)

So mistakenly people think, and the name itself is wrong, it's polycystic ovarian syndrome, which basically indicates that it's a disease of the ovaries. It's not. It's an endocrine condition that affects the whole body like type 2 diabetes. It's in fact a cousin of type 2 diabetes. so women who, they're usually undiagnosed. So although we...

Joyce Harper (46:07.64)

Yes.

Nitu Bajekal (46:26.015)

think one in 10 have PCOS, we think more often it's probably four to five women out of 10, especially in subsets of women who are trying to conceive and other endocrine issues. But 75 % never get a diagnosis because there are such varied symptoms because it's a whole body condition. one minute, it's hallmarks are anovulatory cycles, which means irregular periods. A lot of women may have that. Also androgenic symptoms excess acne after you're an adult, cystic acne, acne on your back and chest and you know on your jawline, excess hair where you don't want it. So

There are certain criteria which I won't go too much into detail but you can have anxiety, depression, you may say a psychiatrist, you may have difficulty conceiving although most women will go on to conceive with help or without help. So you may see a fertility specialist, may have period issues, you may see a gynaecologist, you may have weight issues, so you may see a dietitian, you may have OCD and other things. So you may see a therapist and so nobody joins the dots. So the book...

Living PCOS, you can't cure it. There's no cure for the condition, but diet and lifestyle are the cornerstone. All the things that we talked about, we know that repeatedly. And yes, certain medications can help, but diet and lifestyle is the cornerstone. And so you need to be able to, first of all, get yourself a diagnosis, get people to listen to you and actually make yourself because Rohini, my older daughter, who is a nutritionist and a lifestyle medicine professional who you probably had, you've met her many times, but you probably had her on your podcast and things. So she co-authored the book with me because she herself had PCOS. And so she was shocked when I said, I was going to write a general guide book. She said, here I am with PCOS and you want to write two pages. You're not a GP mom, you're a specialist and PCOS is your specialty, one of your areas.

Nitu Bajekal (48:20.893)

So let's write a book. And so it turned out to be much bigger than it was meant to be because it covers every aspect of the condition. And so there's a lot of help and you can live free. You can't be PCOS free of the condition. But once you understand it, there's like a weight lifted off women and they feel they realize it's not their fault. It's a genetic condition as well. So it's very it's a complex condition.

Joyce Harper (48:49.122)

going back again, as you said, the lifestyle is just so important for not just PCOS, but so many health conditions and as we talked about the perimenopause and our longevity beyond that. it's just all.

Nitu Bajekal (48:55.37)

Yes.

Nitu Bajekal (49:04.785)

not a condition in this world, yeah, not a single condition that will not benefit from making lifestyle changes, whether one has been unfortunate to have a diagnosis of cancer or to try and prevent the cancer from coming back, whether it's high blood pressure, whether it's mental health issues, whether it is gynecological issues, whether it's pregnancy related issues. As I said,

Joyce Harper (49:08.408)

Now.

Nitu Bajekal (49:28.753)

Medication is life-changing for a lot of things, but bringing along diet and lifestyle can really make that journey so much better. And that is really important for people to understand that it's not, if you just took HRT, that's not going to sort out the problem. You have to work on the rest of your health.

Joyce Harper (49:50.658)

Yeah, I'm glad you said that about HRT as well. That's not going to mean that you don't have to do all the things that we've talked about. And Nitu, I love your quote. I think we

need to make this in big letters. If you don't make time for wellness, you will have to make time for illness.

Nitu Bajekal (50:09.099)

Isn't it true though? I don't know if it's original. I don't know if it's original, but it's something I've always thought.

Joyce Harper (50:10.04)

Fantastic. so true. I love it. I love it.

Joyce Harper (50:18.254)

I'll check it, I'll check it, but we'll take it, we'll take it.

Nitu Bajekal (50:20.955)

Yeah, it's like what Rohini often says, if you don't listen to your body when it whispers to you, you will have to listen to it when it shouts. And you know, that is true, isn't it? So you have to listen, you have to be in tune with your body. So important, you have to listen and eyes to be terrible at listening, you know.

Joyce Harper (50:31.47)

That's another good one.

Nitu Bajekal (50:43.179)

lacking sleep I used to always tell my trainees, why are you sleeping? I used sleep three and a half, four hours and they'd say, oh, we overslept. said, sleep is for the dead, don't sleep. And now I'd say, please sleep.

Joyce Harper (50:52.366)

Nitto, nitto, terrible, terrible. Well, you've learned, Yeah, and I always say a good scientist is one that changes their mind and they can contradict what they said. Absolutely. Yeah, yeah, we have to learn, we have to learn. And talking about learning, you and I, we're both very passionate about educating the public and you've created some...

Nitu Bajekal (50:57.119)

What? I have blood.

Nitu Bajekal (51:07.178)

I'm always willing to be proven wrong.

Joyce Harper (51:18.542)

great free resources on your website as well. So I'll put the website link in the show notes. Why do you, why are you so passionate about education?

Nitu Bajekal (51:29.961)

Because I think when you educate one person, especially a woman, you educate a community. I really do believe that because women, we love talking to our friends and

our children and our partners and our parents. And we say, today I heard her and today I saw this and today I ate this. And this is really good. We love that. Education is about that. It's about sharing knowledge. And I think it's really important, especially when you, you know, I've always been a medical trainer. I've trained, you know,

I've been on the deanery and I was the training program director and all that. And I love training students, medical students and doctors and things. But when you train public, especially women, you actually go to the root and the ripple effect is much, much more. And I think that's really important. And the reason I set up my website, this was about... 30 or 25, maybe 28 years ago when I became a consultant and there was no resources. And I was just horrified that my patients would come. I would see them on the NHS and they couldn't go away and think about what I'd said to them.

So I started copying my patients right from day one when everybody laughed at me. And now it is absolutely expected that every woman, nobody should be discussing their health without them being involved. But I started always copying my patients into the letters and then over time started addressing them as well rather than the GP. So that was one thing. But also having these resources because it meant that women and doctors and trainees could go away and read about whether it was a surgical procedure or whether it was about ectopic pregnancy or whatever it was. So I built this up and I sort of try and refresh it every few years so that it gets...more updated and I've had countless GPs and medical students and all tell me how much it's helped them because I don't care there's no nothing to say that it's mine you can print it out and cross out my name I don't care I just want the knowledge to be out there not everybody is a reader nobody everybody doesn't want to read a book or you know they want something shorter and quicker so that's why the podcast and the social media and the website just allows people to have a quick glance and I always made sure a patient read it and I always made sure a nurse read it so that it wasn't in only in doctor speak because doctors can be very annoying, know, generally.

Joyce Harper (54:06.414)

Yeah. Again, we are on the same page about education. It's excellent work. And we're at the end now, Nitu, but I'm going to ask you the questions. I did ask you these when I interviewed you for the book, and you don't have to say the same thing. But the final questions I've always asked my guests on their podcast. what makes you happy and where is your happy place?

Nitu Bajekal (54:33.771)

Probably...

When I walk with my dogs, I think I'm very happy. And when I'm sitting around with my family, especially Christmas, when I think of Christmas, although I'm not a Christian, I'm not even religious, I just have this warm feeling of, know, mulled wine and games and the most amazing food and just like three or four days of just, no, it's, that's my happy place, yes.

Joyce Harper (55:08.878)

Absolutely. You did say the same things actually in the book. So yeah, you did. You did. I loved it. I loved it. And you also said that your family has great conversations. You play little games about would you rather be eaten by a lion or a monkey and all those sorts of games. I love that. I love that. was a lot of joy. Yeah.

Nitu Bajekal (55:13.115)

Did I? my god.

Nitu Bajekal (55:23.135)

Yes. Loads.

Nitu Bajekal (55:29.714)

Yeah, yeah, much more existential questions, you know.

Joyce Harper (55:35.51)

Yeah, I was being a bit tame of what you actually said.

We cut some of them out, they were a bit...

Nitu Bajekal (55:41.693)

Yes, my daughters will love that. No, we don't want to discuss those. They're really hardcore stuff.

Joyce Harper (55:45.966)

No, some of them, yeah, some of them work for publication. And the very, very final question, again, I've asked you this and it's in the, what you answered in the interview is in the back of my book, the very last few pages is what advice would you give your younger self? And it doesn't have to be specifically you, can be younger women. So what advice would you give either yourself or younger women?

Nitu Bajekal (56:00.918)

Yeah.

Nitu Bajekal (56:12.043)

I would give myself the same advice now and to all women, put yourself higher than you think you are and also more importantly for me, slow down. Slow down and smell the roses. Really slow down. Nothing is going to matter in the long run. Nothing. And I think that is what I would say to myself and I think for most younger people and younger women too, yes.

You know, have self-worth and slow down.

Joyce Harper (56:47.01)

My, the first ever podcast I recorded was just me sort of doing an introduction and I asked myself what advice I give my younger self and it was very similar. It was to be more still. I'm still working on it.

Nitu Bajekal (56:58.803)

Yes, think personalities like us, yes, personalities like us, we need to calm down.  
Lovely. Thank you so much Joyce.

Joyce Harper (57:10.478)

And it's Bankology. well, I'm just going to say it's Bankology weekend this weekend. We recorded this a bit before, obviously, it came out. And I'm looking at my hammock right now. And I am determined. I am determined to spend some time in my hammock just reading and listening to music and being slow. So I totally agree with you, Nitu. And I'm going to work on it. But Nitu, thank you so much.

Nitu Bajekal (57:22.008)

nice!

Nitu Bajekal (57:32.585)

Good luck.

Joyce Harper (57:37.568)

Absolute pleasure. You are absolutely a very wise woman. I hope that people have listened to the importance of our lifestyle on our short and long-term health.

Nitu Bajekal (57:52.265)

Thank you. Love you. Thank you so much.

Joyce Harper (57:56.888)

Thank you.